

Leahy says country needs answers about domestic spying

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Vermont Sens. Patrick Leahy and James Jeffords denounced a National Security Agency program that tracks telephone calls made by ordinary Americans, first disclosed in national news reports Thursday.

They said more needed to be learned about the program, but they were unhappy with what they learned from a report in the newspaper USA Today.

"We need to know what our government is doing in its activities that spy upon Americans. The Republican-controlled Congress has failed in its oversight responsibilities to the American people," said Leahy, the top Democrat on the Senate Judiciary Committee.

"News that the NSA has collected the phone records of tens of millions of Americans is deeply disturbing, and demands that Congress delve into the legality of such actions," said Jeffords, an independent. "These reports confirm that Congress has not done a thorough job in investigating the original allegations of illegal wiretapping. I trust that we will learn much more about this latest development as the Senate considers the nomination of General Hayden to head up the CIA."

Air Force Gen. Michael Hayden has been nominated by the president to be director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

USA Today reported that the NSA has been collecting records of phone calls _ but not the conversations themselves _ made by millions of people across the country since shortly after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the United States.

U.S. Rep. Bernard Sanders, an independent, said he was worried about what he called the "continued attacks on constitutional rights unleashed by the Bush administration."

"That's not what America is supposed to be about. We all agree that must do everything we can to protect ourselves from a terrorist attack, but we can and must do this without sacrificing the freedoms on which our nation was founded," Sanders said in a statement. "I intend to do all that I can in Congress to hold this president accountable, and to demand that he obey the law."

State Sen. Peter Welch, D-Windsor, who is running for the seat in Congress now held by Sanders, said Congress had failed to live up to its obligations to investigate surveillance policies.

"The right to privacy has been under assault since President Bush took office," Welch said in a statement. "However, the Republican leadership has failed time and again to provide the needed oversight of the president."

Republican U.S. Senate hopeful Richard Tarrant was more guarded.

"Keeping our country safe should be our top priority, but at the same time the administration needs to live within the law," Tarrant said. "Congressional oversight should balance protecting our country and preserving civil liberties."